Chapter Four: Understanding the Field

This chapter introduces how I began making sense of the ethos in the field, or how I related to the field, with a purpose to develop a context in which the interactions presented in this text may be understood. It attempts to reconstruct the process in which my own ideas about the field were shaped in the interactions I had with the people. In this sense, the descriptions and analyses take a more reflective or introspective form in some sections. This modality was central to the process in which I was oriented to make sense of the social world from the standpoint of the people in the field. In this chapter, keeping in mind the experience, I attempt to present a description of the field and life of the people, and certain contextual ‘meanings’. I will begin by presenting some aspects of the everyday life in the field setting, and then describe the field from two perspectives – that of an outsider and an insider – not with a plain descriptive purpose, but with an idea of bringing out a picture of the standpoints about life in the particular social setting. This would prepare a context in which the meanings made in the context of education and the children’s experience would be situated in subsequent chapters.

In a way, this chapter also represents the confusion that I experienced, as a researcher who was initiating into a field inquiry, that deals with questions of a sociological nature. In part, this confusion emerged from a feeling of impossibility of delimiting the work. Studying the social world (in particular marginalisation and exclusion) made it difficult to limit myself to studying ‘school’ and matters specific to education. Although there was a sense of compulsion to delimit, the search for meanings made spreading-out and digressing pertinent or even alluring. These ‘digressions’ led me to ideas that otherwise did not form a part of how I made sense of the world, and which were not directly explained by the literature in education – the ideas which I was not oriented or ‘trained’ to study. It was only later, particularly in the writing phase, that I was introduced to the location of these ideas in areas like urban citizenship, urban geography, social psychology and social theory. This experience was in itself a part of the re-discovery of theory and of the perspectives where I as an individual grounded
my thoughts. Keeping these processes in mind, the chapter has been organised into two broad sections. The first is an overview of the field that explains the socio-demographic and politico-spatial context of the field and the community with which I was working. The second pertains to how I came to make sense of the lives of the people and the meanings that they made.

4.1. A picture of the setting
Understanding an urban setting which continuously gets established and re-established is not only challenging, but also brings out the limits of the means of knowing that are available to a researcher. In an attempt to trace a ‘history’ of the establishment of the site where I was researching, I explored various official sources\(^1\) and realised how inadequate these were for such information. Except for data pertaining to the authorised or ‘legal’ settlements (the disaggregated estimates of the number of people living in such settlements and the civic amenities officially available), the particular details were not available for the individual sites. What complicated the process of collecting such data was that the area was divided into separate wards, and the ‘illegal’ clusters could not be allocated to any one specific unit.

Further, though amassed data pertaining to the particular wards and the zone were available, specific disaggregated information regarding the settlements could not be traced in the documents available in the public domain. In the process of searching for ‘reliable’ data, I realised that mapping resettlement, jhuggi and unauthorised clusters could be a work worth a separate research that not only maps an individual site but also engages in the nature of official record keeping. Researchers working on the slum, resettlement and unauthorised settlements of Delhi have often pointed out these gaps and the meanings that they hold (Dupont, 2008; Zimmer, 2012). In fact, housing settlement in Delhi has emerged as a special case of inquiry in the areas of urban sociology and urban geography in India.

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\(^1\) Electoral records, City development plans, Economic Survey of Delhi etc.
With the limited information available ‘on record’, except for engaging in a ‘fact-finding’ exercise by interacting with informants who could reliably provide such details, options were not available. The description that I present below, has been developed through the accounts of six informants – two of whom were living at the site for the past ten to fifteen years (Anjum and Teekam), two schoolteachers (Sarita and Shivali), and two NGO workers (Jagwati and Neetu – both born and brought up in a settlement in the field and shifted to another location recently). A local police official also informed the work – though he continued to ‘warn’ me of the dangers of working in the area. A neighbour from an upscale colony in the vicinity (Mrs. Aggarwal – an ex-teacher and a housewife who has been living in the vicinity for the past 25 years) was also a source of information about the development of the site. The accounts have been corroborated using the official records available (GNCTD, 2006; GNCTD, 2008; CGDR, 2011; GOI and CES, 2008) and based on the studies analysing the nature of urban settlement in Delhi (Joseph and Goodman, 2008; Singh and Shukla, 2005; and the like.). What I present in this section is a picture that emerges from these reconstructions.

4.1.1. Initial development of the site
The site where I worked is situated amidst a mix of villages, urban housing settlements and vacant land. When one passes through the inroads, which indicate a high density of population and a pattern of establishment that utilises every single inch of land and still appears to starve for space, it becomes difficult to believe that the site was earlier a patch of vacant land located besides a prominent ‘drain’ in Delhi.

There were villages and unauthorised settlements on the other side of the drain and in the neighbourhood of this empty patch of land that touched what was known as the ‘Outer Delhi’ until 2008. Like many other slum, resettlement and unauthorised clusters in Delhi (Zimmer, 2012), the area started developing in the 1960s when the zone of Delhi where it is located saw rapid urban housing development. In the process of urbanisation and land regularisation, the villages and connected non-agricultural
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land came under the *Lal Dora* and *Phirni*\(^2\). The unauthorised settlements (in the process of land acquisitions by the government) were temporarily shifted across the ‘drain’ to transit camps/resettlement colonies by the government. In fact, one JJ cluster beside the drain emerged at the site during this phase. Three such locations came into being in this process.

The land thus vacated was used for developing the housing plans for government employees (and the related infrastructure). As a result, most of the housing clusters located there carry the names of public sector institutions like State Bank, LIC, GAIL, IFCI, etc. However, this was only a part of the initial development of the resettlement; another phase of marked activity was in the early 1980s. In the second phase, the earlier establishments became more elaborate and a few squatters emerged. These squatters were mainly inhabited by migrating labour, in which Teekam’s (principal informant) relatives and village folks were included. He describes,

> My father and his brother were staying in a *jhuggi*... temporarily assembled bricks with a plastic overhead... the family came later... I was a child but [I] remember that many families took shelter in the huge cement sewer-pipes that were lying around... to be laid underground... you would have been very small, you may not remember; all over Delhi many of *us* lived in these pipes – *wo to ghar hi ban gae thhey*” [they became homes].

I, as a child growing-up in the same zone of Delhi in the late 1980s, could recall the huge sewer pipes which Teekam was referring. These were seen at several places – on the roadsides, beside the drain and in the public parks, waiting to be laid. I also remember seeing people living in them and using them for defecation. I was warned in school and at home to not to go near these pipes and to stay away from the

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\(^2\) According to Tejinder Khanna Committee report (GOI, 2006), Delhi has in all 362 villages, of which 135 are currently classified as urban villages and 227 as rural villages. In 1908, when the revenue settlement was done for the first and only time, the *abadi* of these villages were included within a well-defined “*Lal Dora area*”, outside which the agricultural produce was assessed for purposes of land revenue. Thereafter, the exercise of consolidation of land holdings in Delhi villages began in the year 1952 and is still continuing. Since the village *abadi* had undergone natural expansion between the settlement of 1908 and the commencement of consolidation operations, the extended village *abadi* was enclosed within the new peripheral boundary known as “*phirni*”, the area between the original Lal Dora and the post consolidation *phirni* being treated as “extended Lal Dora” (p. 52).
‘beggars’ who reside in them. I was told that the government was going to develop a good sanitation system for the houses being built in the region, of which my family’s house was one.

I learnt from Teekam that some sections of the M Block were the first ones to develop and therefore look a little more ‘planned’ and ‘better’ established than the others. Most housing settlements in the M Block are authorised/regularised (including a notified JJ colony). The M Block has several State institutions located there including a government hospital, a water treatment plant that caters to a part of the zone, a post office, 6 schools (4 MCD and 2 DOE), a training centre for the blind, an electoral office, and a disaster management cell. One of the only two pre-school institutions – a ‘nursery’ for children under 6 years of age (under the UEEM scheme) – is located at the M Block E-5 MCD school premise (one that I was studying). The police station for the K Block too is located on the periphery of the M Block. Such ‘legality’ in the character of the M Block and its relatively older existence were the main reasons for which the entire setting (including the neighbourhood) was popularly referred to as the ‘M Block’.

**Box 4.1.: Problem of tracing social-history of the sites**

Finding reliable sources or informants who could provide insights into the history (or histories) of these sites and the clusters that constitute it, was in itself a task. This was particularly because of two reasons. Firstly, all the three major settings into which the area is divided gradually emerged over a period of time and continue to unfold as they exist. The clusters within the three settings became established at varied points in time as make-shift arrangements – authorised or unauthorised – and therefore each can be said to have a history (or recent history) of its own. While one among them was supposed to be a permanent residential settlement (*Janta* flats) which was developed by the government in the late 1970s, in due course it began to be used by people as a tenancy arrangement and therefore assumed a temporary character. Secondly, (and also because of the first) the site is populated by people migrating for work from and to various States in the country.
Most informants residing in the three vicinities live as tenants or have purchased the *jhuggies* from the previous owners, and have been around the place at the most for 10 – 15 years. The people frequently change their homes as per the demands of work and lives, and so the houses continue to change hands. When a household acquires sufficient resources to shift to a better setting, they leave the place. Jagwati’s family was one of such families, and so were those of the two other community workers of the NGO (Neetu and Saroj).

These clusters continuously transit in terms of people who inhabit them – a character of these sites commonly registered in studies (Antony and Maheshwaran, 2001, p. 2). Therefore, there was a variation in the accounts that people gave – in the sense that the accounts had more to do with their individual histories than with that of the setting. For example, though Shabnam’s grandmother’s (Anjum’s) account of the manner in which the *sadhe-barah-gaj* came to be known so (as described in Chapter Three) sounded believable and was repeated by a few more people living there, there were no resonances of it in the accounts of the relatively new settlers.

### 4.1.2. Present context

#### a. M Block

The M Block is separated into three municipal wards – two urban and one rural. Some segments of the rural ward, though not physically distinguishable now from the other areas, were there before the rest of the area developed and are now economically much better off (which becomes visible through the nature of socio-economic conditions like the construction of houses and ownership of vehicles). The M Block is most sought after and also the most expensive location – even the JJ colony houses there have much higher rents\(^3\) (as high as Rs. 1000 per month for a room, excluding the cost of civic amenities) than the sites in the K Block and Shiv Puri (varying from

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\(^3\) The rent is decided based on negotiations between the tenant and the dealer. The major factor in this is the reliability of the tenant. I observed that there was a willingness to compromise a higher rent to get a reliable tenant. As Teekam says, “… if the owner is dealing directly, he checks if I am a family man, and usually rents out the *jhuggi* when he sees that a man has daughters… A family with older [teenage] sons face more problems… having *jaan-pehchaan* in the neighbourhood is also considered… but hard bargaining is involved”.

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Rs. 700 to 500 per month, excluding any kind of civic amenity). This matches the market rent rates for *jhuggies*. As per GCDR (2011, p 14)

[The] average rent per month for a Jhuggi is reported to be INR 847 per month… highest rent is reported from Central zone at INR 1054, followed by North INR 952, South INR 938, West INR 740 and the minimum in the East at INR 648.

Considering, average floor area of slum house to be 100 square feet, the per-square foot rental works out to be INR 8.5, which is quite close to the market rate. The only difference is in the total amount being disposed off for accommodation. This also means, given the limited resources, a slum dweller that has to rent a room would be better-off even with market rate provided the total outgo is not altered. This is also a reason that not many people take slum house on rent in Delhi. (sic.)

However, Teekam tells me that in cases where people are unable to pay for security (at times called *pagadi* or ‘sicrooty’ (security)) or where the tenant is a relative or someone from the village of origin of the *jhuggi* owner – renting comes as a more economical option. The economics for resettlement colonies and transit camps is different. For a two ‘BHK’, the rates go up to Rs. 7000 per month. While in the villages of the neighbourhood, the price of a floor goes as high as Rs. 20 lakhs for a two ‘BHK’ – if at all it could be called ‘BHK’.

Most children from the M Block (as per the accounts of Ms. Kavita, the schoolteachers and the incharge) complete at least the first few years of schooling. Most of them gradually start helping their parents in their work, as a substantial proportion of people in the area are involved in some kind of self-employment. The school where I located the work was situated on the periphery of the M-Block, and catered to children coming from the JJ colony, *sadhe-barah-gaj* and other resettlement colonies, along with the children from the K Block whose houses were nearby. The set-up of Shiv Puri and the K block is different from that of the M Block.
Site map: M-Block, K-Block and Shiv Puri

The site-map (drawn by the researcher) depicts only those spaces which have been described in the thesis at some point and facilitate in contextualising the setting.
b. Shiv Puri
Shiv Puri includes two transit camps, which are now increasingly becoming populated by people migrating from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It has one smaller slum squatter, that is not recognised by the government institutions of the area as even being there (and very few children from the cluster were going to school). However, the police station has two FIRs registered against people living in that setting. The police personnel (an informant) tells me,

It is like this; if you check our records and match them with others [that of other institutions] you will be shocked. There are so many contradictions regarding these slums and all that… No office will show you any record. They will ask you to go to the website and check.

Unko ‘order’ hai nahin dikhane ka [They have an ‘order’ to not show].

What he says turned out to be the case when I attempted to explore the records. I was never denied any information, and was dealt with very politely. But I could not find the information I was looking for at the local MCD office or the electoral office. The NGO workers shared the same experience when they mapped the area. Thus, the NGO had initiated the process of developing its own record by a door-to-door survey, which had its own problems. The workers who were collecting data were neither trained in seeking information from people, nor did the people share complete information with them (an example of which I presented in Chapter Three under the heading ‘anonymity and the taboo of caste’).

c. K Block
The K Block is the biggest among them all and has four phases, which fall under three separate municipal wards, one of which is recognised as an urban village. The village has a higher proportion of the Sikh community residing in it. Many houses in this village have turned out to be small factories for spare parts, compact disc manufacturing, timberwork, chemicals and dyes, with turnovers as high as 25 lakhs per annum. There is a private school located in this village, which most of its children attend. This was one setting where I could not interact with the people.
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The urban wards of the K Block have a JJ colony and several slum squatters (three, excluding the several small patches of houses on the pavements), which do not have a ‘legal’ water connection, have temporary electricity arrangements and no toilets. Strangely, these squatters do not figure in the list of unauthorised settlements in Delhi (GNCTD, 2021; GNCTD, 2006).

The police official told me that these squatters of the K Block have castes/tribes which were listed under the “Denotified Tribes Act” (though there was no way of cross-verifying this claim at the time when I stumbled upon it, in due course of time it turned out to be a correct representation). Non-enrolment in school in these settlements was high (except for a few families, none had enrolled their children in the school). These were the squatters where most people did not have any proof of citizenship (birth certificate, caste certificate, voter cards, or ration cards). As per the door-to-door survey that I did along with the NGO, barring ten families who had recently settled there none had any such proof and therefore had no ‘right to vote’. I located a substantial part of work in these clusters and worked with three principal informants from one such cluster – the Tanki Wali Jhuggi. Teekam also stayed in this cluster. There were 4 MCD and 4 Sarvodaya Schools in the K Block, and one private school (in the village), called the ‘Gaur School’ – the name of the school appeared interesting for its explicit caste affiliation. There were other private schools around the area which were more popular among the community.

The entire area comprising of the M Block, K Block and Shiv Puri was spread out in around a little more than two kilometres – not in a straight stretch, but in two L-shaped stretches. However, it merged almost ‘naturally’ on the western end with similar localities, and if one ignored the signposts it was not possible to make a distinction where the area ended and a new one began. As I became familiar with the setting, I understood that the only way to distinguish where an area ends and a new one begins is to trace separations through the ‘roads’ (narrow lanes) that connect to the Ring Road. Further, the manner in which the setting was established within this more-than-two-kilometre stretch, was convoluted and complicated – in the sense that
not only was it densely populated, it was also ‘planned or unplanned’ in a fashion that was different for each of the settlements. Those of its resettlement clusters which figure in the official records (GNCTD, 2006), are low concentration clusters (each with a population less than 15,000 - 20,000, which as per the observations of the NGO and the police official seems to be an underestimation by at least 20%).

A resettlement colony and a notified JJ colony (both ‘legal’), and other dilapidated squatters (unauthorised/illegal) do not figure in the plans and records of the Delhi Government. Despite several attempts, I could not trace official data about them. As per the NGO records, observations and interactions there were around 2500 households of this kind in the area, excluding the pavement dwellings. In this context, Zimmer’s (2012, pp. 89 – 90) observation appears meaningful:

These forms of social exclusion are predicated upon different (and differently structured) fields of visibility that frame the approach to various types of urban settlements. The State “sees” residents in informal settlements differently from other citizens – if it chooses to see them at all. In fact, the literature suggests that despite their large numbers, informally living (or working) populations are (semi) invisible to their governments, and especially to the administration. A stark example of this invisibility in India is the fact that for example, slum residents were not enumerated in the census until 2001.

What Zimmer (2012) calls semi-invisibility unfolded before me as a state of nebulousness that got attributed to the space that I was exploring, when the local administration by itself wasn’t clear about what stand to take about it. The officials from the State administration (including SSA, police, election office, and the MCD) I interacted with, could not officially state or on record share information about the sites. But as people who ‘saw’ the setting and dealt with it, they could not deny that the official records did not match the common sense. This was a ‘finding’ for me as a person, much more than what it was to me as a researcher. It made me reflect upon the manner in which I perceived the life and world around me – and how my ‘being-
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ness’ is positioned in relation to that of the ‘others’ and how two kinds of life spaces may be shaped within the same geo-spatial context. It was for the first time that I made sense of what Mills (1959) would call a lack of sociological imagination.

4.1.3. Prominent features of the settlements

a. Population

The total population of the M Block, K Block and Shiv Puri taken together in 2012 was roughly around 1 lakh (as per the estimates of the NGOs and informants). There were 2500 houses in the slum squatters and around 5000 houses in the resettlement colonies/transit camps. However, the electoral rolls indicated the population to be only 49,650. This data did not include people who had no citizenship proof, those who did not have their votes transferred to the State, and children. The census data was only available for the tehsil level and disaggregated figures could not be traced. As per the NGO’s estimates, apart from this, there were at least one lakh people living there. If one goes beyond the site to map the entire stretch beside the drain in around five kilometres, these estimates go up to 6 lakh and around 65 thousand houses.

b. Structure of dwellings in different clusters

There were visible inter-cluster variations in the socio-economic statuses of the households in terms of the nature of houses, occupations, and education. However, each cluster was relatively homogenous in terms of cultural, socio-economic status and even with reference to schooling. The structure of the settlements in various clusters differed in terms of the nature of the construction of houses, ranging from permanent (brick and cement) two-storeyed buildings, single storeyed (single room) kuchcha building, temporary jhuggies, mud-jhuggies with temporary roofs, pavement dwellings settled under some arrangement on bamboo sticks, and those who slept on the pavement without a roof.

However, as I explored the clusters I realised that what was common among them all was the manner in which they used the space. In the resettlement colonies, the gap between the houses was very less. The first floors of the houses bulged out in such a manner that there was less than a foot of space between the balconies of two houses,
so much so that neither of the two could open the windows towards the outside. Even that one foot gap was filled by electricity cables loosely tied to the poles, on which at times small garbage bags/fallen clothes were seen hanging. The lanes in all the clusters were so narrow that only one person could walk at a time (that too by moving sideways at times) and two persons abreast was simply not possible. Also, these lanes ran in irregular spirals through the clusters, and a new person would lose his/her way very easily. I (and the NGO workers as well) got lost inside the clusters several times, and became a subject of jokes and laughter for the children when I sought help. Sometimes children took me right through the settlements via longer routes just for fun, even when they knew the shorter ways out. I learnt how to find my way in and out from the children. This was another experience in which my concept of urban-space became problematic. The city appeared to have a different design in these settings, than how it looked from the outside.

c. Regional affiliations, languages, religions, castes
People from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and (of late) Bihar, populated the settlements. Although Gujarat does not form a prominent magnet area for Delhi (GOI and CES, 2008), there was a considerable population from the region living there. Hindi was the most commonly spoken language, given the regional variation in the area. Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism were the religions that were practised by the people, whereby around 32 percentage of the population practised the latter two religions (as per the NGO records). There were two mosques, three major temples (and many smaller ones), and one Gurudwara. One of the temples ‘belonged’ to the Bagri/Baghari/Vaghri caste (different pronunciations of the same name) – which is a scheduled caste from Rajasthan and Gujarat (Singh 1993, p. 71). According to the principal informants Teekam, Jagwati and Shivali, a significant proportion (20%) of people residing in the area are from the Vaghri caste. This temple is very popular and is a major landmark for the place. However, as per informants’ accounts, people from all castes visited the temple. Another prominent caste in the area was Balmiki; there was a Balmiki samaj temple in the area as well. As described in the previous chapter,

4 The children, with whom I interacted with at the school and in the community, were much more fluent in Hindi than in their respective mother tongues.
based on estimates available from official records, it can be said that the slum or JJ clusters in the zone had a very high concentration (80%) of the scheduled castes population. However, these estimates cannot be reliably generalised. There are contradictions in the data gathered by varied State agencies. For example, in the context of the slums in Delhi the Planning commission (GDCR, 2011) states,

From the distribution of households by caste & religion it is observed that among Hindus 53.5 per cent of the total households belong to SC, 30.5 per cent OBC, 2.9 per cent ST and the remaining 13.1 per cent in General category. In case of Muslims, OBCs account for the majority of the households at 70.2 per cent, SC only 0.7 per cent, ST 0.4 per cent and General category 28.7 per cent. ... Among the Sikh’s 34.5 per cent are OBC, 12.4 per cent SC and 53.1 per cent in General category.

(p. 47)

Furthermore, the averages do not highlight the skewed character of slum settings. Considerable variations emerge with slight distinctions in the socio-economic-regional profiles of the settlements. For example, inasmuch as the NGO records showed and the information that the informants provided, it emerged that there was a distinction in caste profiles between the settings. Some settlements, which were socio-economically better than others, had a relatively diverse profile in terms of caste; that is, there were families from upper castes, OBC, and SC.

d. Nature of work and socio-economic standard

The problem of official records further became visible when I went through Delhi’s economic survey data and from the official surveys of the slums of Delhi. Specific descriptions of the kind of work that people engaged in were not available. I came across statements like the following:

People staying in JJ clusters are normally engaged in blue collar activities. Most of the people staying in unauthorised colonies of the East and West zones are engaged in service sector jobs. However, in the north and south zone UCs there is a high concentration of people in
blue collar jobs and they are mostly skilled and semi-skilled workers.
(sic.) (GOI and CES, 2005, p. 8)

As indicated in Chapter Three, a variety of occupations are practised in the area. There were daily wageworkers (many now joining as security guards with private agencies), contractual labour, blacksmiths, cobbler, carpenters, MCD contractual staff, plumbers and rag-pickers. A significant proportion of people were vendors or self-employed – as high as 50% of the households had their own small peddling or street corner businesses.

However, small entrepreneurial employments were not only found to be common but were more sought after. Though there was explicit homogeneity in the occupations within each kind of settlement, as per the accounts of Anjum and Teekam it was changing in nature – in the sense that people were increasingly looking at starting some small “business” even if they were already employed. Teekam says, “Now there is a variety of shehri kaam [city/urban work] that many of us are doing.” There were several instances where people living in a cluster, with the help of neighbours, took up a common vocation. For example, in the tanki-wali-jhuggi a family that did the work of sticking soles to shoes for a contractor, helped five of their neighbours in getting a contract for the same job, and a car mechanic took on his neighbours’ sons as apprentices. I will be continuing to describe how self-employment and work was situated in the lives of the people, through specific cases as the thesis unfolds.

e. Morning-market and barter economics

The outer periphery of the M Block that borders the main connecting road in the area has several shops. These shops are owned/rented by merchants dealing in a variety of products – utensils, second-hand wooden furniture, second hand clothes and white-wash material. On the opposite side of the road one finds a fruit and vegetable mandi (that becomes very dense and covers the entire road area leading to the outer-ring road on Thursday evenings and mornings of the festive seasons). There are several butcher shops that go down into a lane where bigger animals are slaughtered. The owners of most of these shops did not reside in the vicinity – they had homes in the better-off
neighbouring villages. However, as per the police official’s and Teekam’s accounts, the employees working at the shops resided in the locality. Apart from this, there were small shops within the clusters also – mainly of eatables and confectionery. Teekam tells me, “… best business these days is of food stalls… chowmein is best, it’s cheap, easy and spicy – so sells well.”

Among the several things that I ‘discovered’ about the ways in which people live, while I was pursuing the study, was the weekday morning market (from 3 am to 8 am) at M-Block. On the main road that passes through the site touching both the M Block and K Block, a daily morning market was set up in a sheltered market area built by the MCD forty years back (Norris 2010, p. 40). It had cement sheet shelters placed over pillars and was open from all sides. It had an entry fee of 2 rupees. If one had to see the market being set up, one had to be there at 3.00 am in the morning – when one would see several auto-rickshaws loaded with sacks and people, cycle-carts, and men and women with huge potlis, gathering at the M Block road. These groups of people set up their stalls in the sheltered market, and by 4.00 am the area was completely covered with garments and people. The market started at 4.00 am, reached its peak between 5.30 am and 6.30 am, and was wound up by 7.30 am. The market mainly focussed on selling the second-hand garments collected during the day from posh localities, in exchange for new utensils – the people in this business being popularly known as ‘bartanwale’. That is, the sellers who came to the market were the people who went around in the upscale colonies across Delhi, ‘bartering’ new utensils for second-hand clothes.

Women’s clothes (saris and dupattas) with embroidery and zari work got the best exchange, followed by denim garments. A good proportion of the garments thus collected, I was told, are consumed by the whitewashing business, while some proportion is recycled (after washing and ironing) into bed-spreads, pillow covers, tablemats, caps, bags, shoes and designer coats for women – sold at some popular street markets in Delhi. Barter takes place in this market as well. In this process, I realised a pattern in the local economics. From such observations in the local markets
and my interaction with the informants, it clearly emerged that this trade was a pillar for the household economics of around 10% of the homes in the locality. What was central in this economy was that the women led it (the men only assisted the women); and that this trade was practised only by the Gujarati women. Norris (2010) has documented such engagements in India, and has highlighted the prominence of Delhi in this trade. Her work describes the second hand garment trade and its economics, while it also brings to the fore that a significant proportion of the women involved in the trade belong to the Bagri/Waghari/Vagri caste – listed among the Denotified tribes of Gujarat⁵ (earlier notified under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871). This also verified the account that the police officer (informant in this study) presented, which I was earlier unable to verify and thus doubted his reliability.

Box 4.2.: An NGO’s claim

While I was searching for works and researches in the context of the market to trace its history, I came across reports that were published by an NGO that presented its involvement in promoting the market, particularly by ‘empowering’ women to participate in it. When I attempted to verify these claims, Jagwati told me that the organisation works for the women’s cause in the area and had been attempting to get involved in this market (since 2005) by ‘any means’ – with an intention to share the credit of promoting such an initiative. She tells me, “… the people didn’t entertain them, and they [the NGO people] began focussing on the poor Gujarati and Rajasthani women who were unable to participate in the market.” The NGO has been able to back them with resources and secure a separate legal space for five of them in a nearby area – where they sell their products on Sunday. Anjum confirmed what Jagwati had told me, and added, “… the sanstha-wale have made some arrangements for women there, let us see how it works out; even for their houses they have got a common sarkari water and electricity connection… but now the sanstha is going, let us see how long this continues”. In fact, the same organisation is also piloting a voucher distribution scheme of the Delhi Government, aimed at the testing of substituting the ration system of the

Apart from this trade, mobiles, belts and shoes were the most common items being sold in the morning market - all second-hand. One could hear loud voices shouting out the prices and competing with each other, and a large number of buyers bargaining for every five rupees. Most buyers were people from the M Block, K Block and neighbouring areas; however, I was told that ‘fashion designers’ also send their apprentices and employees to the market especially during the Navratri season.

If one visits this market during these hours, it would be difficult to find even a patch where a stall was not put up. Shabnam’s grandmother told me that until few years back the market was much livelier, but now many people have started going to other markets. She tells me that this market came into being along with the place. One of the vendors, Saraswati (30 years), also told me that this market has been there since she was a child – earlier she used to come with her mother, now she comes with her husband and children. As per her accounts, the market is very old, as old as the place itself – though she knows that it came-up in phases and still continues in several other places in Delhi – Norris (2010) traces its history to the 1920’s. Although barter doesn’t seem to fit into the manner in which the ‘trade’ happens in the city, in the midst of big malls and up-scale markets in the vicinity, this barter was a means of livelihood for a large number of ‘people’ in the city.

f. A ‘relationship’ with the drain
The drain, alongside which the settlement existed, had a peculiar space in the lives of the people. It was a source of ‘water’ – it was the only place where an underground pipeline for treated water supply came to the surface. The mechanics from the squatters in the vicinity loosened the nuts and made a leakage, and the water was used for bathing, washing clothes and at times for drinking. Five years back, until the MCD got a wall constructed along the sides, the drain was used by people for defecating, dumping garbage and rearing pigs. The garbage dumps brought an “opportunity” for another kind of recycling business in the locality – rag-picking. Gradually, a cluster of
‘illegal’ squatters came up with people engaged in the garbage sorting and selecting business – popularly known as ‘kachra jhuggi’. The NGO employees and the police official told me that most people living in the cluster are either SC or Muslims.

Now that a part of the nalaa wall has been broken and the drain serves the same purposes again. The banks of the drain and the railings are used for drying clothes, as it is the only open area available in the vicinity. Apart from this, Teekam tells me that earlier the drain had cleaner water, which was used for washing clothes and bathing animals – and that fishes, and water plants were found in the nalaa until sometime back. In search for verifications for this account, I found out from official sources that what is now called a ‘drain’, was earlier called the Sahibi river – a tributary of the river Yamuna. With the development of the city the river became a point where untreated the sewage pipes were drained. Until the early 1980s it was clean enough to be used for washing and bathing purposes; but since then it has become increasingly polluted, so much so that the people had no option other than to ‘steal’ useable water from pipes and the water-tank in the area. In fact, one of the tanki-wali-jhuggi cluster got its name for the reason that it is near a water tank (paani ki tanki) – such that people can easily ‘steal’ water or bribe the officials to supply water. One of my principal informants, Hazari (a thirteen year old boy), who resides in this jhuggi cluster makes a living for himself and his family from this ‘business’ of ‘stealing’ water and supplying it to the nearby homes and shops – those which are not ‘legal enough’ to get a legitimate water supply. Hazari says, “… I don’t know about the river but if it would have been there I would have been richer; I would supply water from it; nobody would call me a thief... humko chor kehte hain; hum paani kahan se laaen? bade log ke ghar se? […] they call us thieves; where do we bring water from? From rich people’s homes?]”. He was clear about the idea that what the people who ‘purchase’ the water paid him was for his labour and not for the water.

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The Sahibi river or the Najafgarh nalaa was severely flooded in 1977-1978, the memory of which still bears an impression in the community memory and the stories passed on from the older generation. Jagwati tells me, “My grandmother and her neighbours used to perform pooja on the nalaa to prevent the flood… they told us that there was a very strong flood before I was born and one of the children in the neighbourhood had died.” There were similar floods earlier as well which were caused by the releasing of a “more than notified” amount of sewer waste during the rains by the Haryana government. To check the floods, the Delhi Government dug up both the sides of the drain to broaden it. The nalaa is so broad now that in summers it looks wider than the river Yamuna.7

The Sahibi river, before entering the city is much cleaner and is used for fishing. It basically links to a lake, the area around which has been declared by the government as a bird sanctuary. How the life of the river and the lives of the people have been implicated in the process of the ‘urban development’ of the city comes across in a pronounced form through this situation. The fact that ‘housing development’ for the middle class was the reason for which people (who happened to be) from particular social groups were shifted to the vicinity of the river, which was being ‘strategically and legitimately’ turned into a drain, in itself bears a character which makes it something more than just another fact.

Furthermore, the idea that ‘the people beside the drain’ were those who ‘contributed’ to this ‘planned’ development, and managed and recycled the ‘waste’ of a city which continues to deem them a part of a pathology of urban spaces, qualifies a peculiar moral character of the city. How State sees this social class as an aberration or a trouble-maker and continues to find ways to ‘de-legitimise’ and ‘demolish’ its livelihoods is examined in the literature (Ghetner, 2008; Singh and Shukla, 2005). In an examination of the ‘legal discourse’ behind slum demolitions in Delhi, Ghetner (2008) says,

7 The descriptions in this paragraph were corroborated from the same website as mentioned in footnote 6.
I find that the rise of court orders to demolish slums is occurring not simply because the judiciary is suddenly “anti-poor,” but rather because of a reinterpretation of nuisance law, the main component of environmental law in India... Nuisance has thus become the key legal term driving slum demolitions and has been incredibly influential in resculpting both Delhi's residential geography and how the city's future is imagined. (p. 57)

In the process of the fieldwork of this study, the relation between the ‘slums’ (or margins) and the ‘centre’, and the negotiations between the ‘two systems’, continued to unfold as I attempted to map experiences and relationships in the context of schooling. While the purpose was to study educational experiences, these negotiations and relations emerged as a frame in which the school got situated. In this understanding of the ‘life beside the drain’, I was also introduced to a feature of exclusion in the urban space and explored some initial literature in relation to it. While exploring the ‘geographies of exclusion’, I came across the work of Sibley (1995, p. xiv) who looks at how marginalised groups are rendered invisible or deviant to the ‘affluent’ by the separations of city centre development which keep the underclass at a distance. The work identifies the composition of this ‘underclass’ as being refracted through their socio-cultural identities (that is to say that the black population, and ethnic and religious minorities are likely to be more separated from the affluent centre). In this context the work explores the ‘otherness’ and ‘exclusion’. Similarly, Duneier (2000), while living with the black men who make their livelihood selling petty items on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village, explores how they are placed in relation to the ‘city’ that deals with them – and how they come to be deemed or perceived as threatening or unseemly, despite actually ‘saving’ the city from several contingencies. In tune with such thinking, the following section locates how I began understanding the ‘relationships’ of the margins to the city. In the following pages, two orientations towards the ways of life have been explored.
4.2. Orientations: Inside and outside
As stated earlier, in this section I will describe the field from two perspectives – that of an outsider and an insider – not with a plain descriptive purpose, but with an idea of bringing out a picture of the standpoints about life in the particular social setting. These perspectives were central in orienting or ‘familiarising’ me with the life in the field or in the margins of the city.

4.2.1. Describing ‘the Other’
In the process of locating the field, I interacted with several people who were actually outsiders to the field (in the sense that they did not live there) but for some reasons had some relation with the setting. These included people working for the NGO (Ms. Kavita and Jagwati), two teachers (Sarita and Shivali), and Mrs. Aggarwal who resided in one of the upscale neighbourhoods that encircled the field (I had known her and her family personally even before starting the work). The everyday lives of them all demanded some relation with the field, for reasons concerning their employment and/or household needs. Therefore, all of them had to interact with the people living in the field. All of them were from a better socio-economic strata, and given a chance they would have preferred not to work/live in the vicinity of the field. This became explicit when every one of them discouraged me from working in the locality, citing more or less a similar reason – which related to the difficulty that a woman is likely to encounter in the area and the futility of working with the people living in the field.

These interactions happened during the phase in which I was making an attempt to gain entry into the field and trying to understand the locality better – its history, its socio-cultural-economic profile, its connection with the ‘other’ neighbouring localities, who is likely to have what kind of information/insights, what are the major challenges, and the like. In a way, the purpose was also to understand the views that the people held about the setting – and in this way also coming to qualify my own common sense about the place. These interactions happened around a set of

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All the people listed here, excepting Mrs. Aggarwal, continued to inform me during the study and in due course emerged as principal informants. On many occasions, interactions with these informants took the form of ‘gossip’. I avoided being very involved in it and was careful in cross-verifying accounts. Although, gossip is a useful way of coming to know and relating to people, it has its limitation in terms of reliability.
tentatively designed questions, and in this sense these were semi-structured (that
probed on the lines indicated above). As I did not have informants from the field in
the initial phases, I began to interact with these outsiders. In these interactions, I got a
sense of how these ‘outsiders’ perceived and created for me an image about the
people living the field. The following section documents the prominent constituents of
this image.

a. The descriptor: Gandagi
Among the most frequently used descriptor that these informants used in the context
of the field comprising the three localities (M Block, Shiv Puri and K Block) was
‘filthy’, or ‘dirty’. The site was described in terms of the ‘gandagi’ in and around. The
informants primarily viewed the entire locality as ‘a slum’ which was dirty,
irrespective of the diversity of what was visible ‘out there’. Mrs. Aggarwal said,

This is a very big slum and stretches along the entire nalaa [drain]…
it’s so very dirty; people make a mess and continue to live on it… there
is such a huge population living there that no matter how many ever
facilities you may provide, they will fall short; this is because these
people produce one child after another even when they can’t afford
them.

Sarita felt,

The most major issue is that I have to travel by rickshaw to the school
or at times even walk… there is so much gandagi [filthiness] around
that I cover my nose and mouth… people don’t have the culture of
using the toilet; all of them are in the habit of going on the footpaths.
Not that there are no toilets; but it’s all about culture and education.

Jagwati having lived in the area thought a little differently,

People would feel that this area has a lot of gandagi and that people
don’t care about cleanliness. But there are a few colonies where people
keep the surroundings very clean, people are more educated there… but
yes, by and large it is dirty and you feel it all the more during the
rains… one gets a filthy feeling while walking by.
The description of ‘gandagi’ was not a plain description of the state of sanitation in the area. Although these informants were referring to the unclean surroundings, (which they described in many words) and lack of general sanitation, they also wanted to communicate something beyond that. The manner in which the term ‘gandagi’ was used had a particular quality/ethos, in that it was used as an ‘adjective’ for the ways of the life of the people. The manner in which it was presented and argued against came across as a marker representing, or a manifest form of, a perceived culture of life – a culture that has many more markers than just lack of sanitation (like lack of education which in itself connoted a large number of children, less income). However, the ‘unclean’ way of life was the most expressive term capable of communicating the spirit that the informants intended to narrate. To a certain extent the adjective was loaded with a particular idea or a perception about poverty or poor people.

A further description of the gandagi included issues that the informants perceived to be prominent in the lives of the community – a large number of children in every family, the meagre incomes, and lack of cleanliness – all of which in effect were ascribed to lack of education. By education, therefore, all the four informants meant more than just literacy. That is, there was some relation that they saw between how people live, or the ways of life, and education. For example, Shivali said, “Education changes the way we live and how we behave… this place from the very look of it tells one that the people are uneducated.” This was the initial glimpse of the metaphor of ‘hygiene’ that continued to unfold during the process of this study.

b. Poor and deviant
The outsiders’ description of the field as a place where the ‘lower class’ resided, as a slum, and as dirty and uneducated, also brought forth poverty as a condition of life for the people. The concept of poverty did not emerge in discussions about the challenges that people may be facing in everyday life. It came across as an explanation of the ‘moral character’ of the people living in the field. The four informants expressed their ‘disturbances’ on the state of affairs that implicated their everyday life and thought that this was an outcome of living around a poor neighbourhood – in that they were
referring to another descriptor – a lack of ‘safety’. This added flesh to the connotation of *gandagi* or the metaphor of ‘hygiene’ that was indicated above. Sarita says,

The area is so unsafe that you cannot walk alone... all the more for women... many drunkards and addicts all around the place... Prostitution, theft, murders, abduction are all common leave alone petty snatching incidents. I cling on to my purse while sitting in the rickshaw and never carry much cash; and most importantly never wear a [gold] chain... Many of our teachers have experienced such incidents... I wonder what the future of these children will be? The children at our school are girls, so it’s a little better for us. Otherwise I would have gone in for a private job.

Mrs. Aggarwal felt,

... we give them jobs and bear the brunt. There have been so many instances where someone was employed [as a domestic help] and in a matter of a few days she stole whatever was available and disappeared... the men are all the more dangerous and abscond to their villages, all having committed some crime or the other... what do they have to lose? They are here one day and gone the next, and this area is known for the petty criminal castes. Give them a little freedom and see what they would do to us... they are like that.

Jagwati says,

... many people are engaged in theft and all because they are addicts... my parents do not feel comfortable in sending me here for the job, but it is only once a week that I come here... one major reason why we shifted from this place was that except for our colony and a few more, in the rest of the area the conditions are very bad. Eve teasing is very common... children pick up all this from a very young age.

The outsiders understood crime as another way of life for the people of the field. Poverty was not seen as pathos or a condition; it was rather stated as a rationale for people to commit crimes – “what do they have to lose”. Listening to such accounts,
the sense that I (or any young woman) would develop about the ‘area’ would be that of a shelter where anti-social trouble makers resided. As if it was not a settlement for people, but of a ‘community’ that traditionally practises crime and socialises children into the same. Poverty was therefore not seen as a situation where people were ‘trapped’, but rather as a ‘given’ which led to a particular kind of ways of life and was perpetuated by these ways. What was special about such a description was that Jagwati who was born and brought up in the M-Block also attributed a similar character to the setting – but she marked her colony as an exception consciously to ensure that I don’t place her in the picture she was sketching. However, as a researcher there was a need for constantly questioning and pondering over such perceptions. It was in this process that the duality that a researcher may encounter was underlined, along with a sharpening of understanding of how gender would implicate the understandings.

c. Unwilling to ‘change’
Another character that was attributed to the people residing in the field was their unwillingness for what the informants called ‘the change’. Illiterates, unwilling to do labour, lethargic, badmash (miscreants) and gunda (goon) were frequently used for describing the people, more particularly the children and the adolescents. Shivali, while describing the difficulties of her job, often said, “Kya karega koi jab ye khud badalna hi nahi chahte… school nahin aate to kya karen” [What would anyone do, when they themselves do not want to change… if they don’t come to school, what to do?].

It was therefore also implicit that there was a need to change and that the things weren’t ‘right’ or ‘appropriate’. This rightness had less to do with the conditional constraints, and more with the attitude of the people living in the area. That is to say, had there been a will to change for the better, the things would have changed. Or it would be more appropriate to say that the informants thought that an intrinsic change within people, and not the external conditions, was needed. And in this way, the external pathos was also attributed to something that was intrinsic to the attitude of
the people living there. This change, in their view, was being curtailed by an intrinsic unwillingness. This unwillingness was manifest in the people’s rejection or apathy towards schooling the children, and not making conscious attempts of changing their situation. Even the SSA personnel, Mr. Mehta, who otherwise was more sensitive with regard to understanding the state of education and the ‘apathy’ of the people towards it, said:

Change will come about only if the people take interest in education for children; otherwise the generations will continue to be like that…

Look, if we ourselves don’t want to change, then nobody can do anything for us.

While Jagwati and Mrs. Aggarwal also felt that education is the only way to change, and if there is an apathy towards it not much can be done from the outside, Sarita differed in her views about the potential implications of education. She said,

… what can education do? It can do only the minimum; it can only enhance what is already there and must be supported continuously…

when the environment at home is bad then how would school do anything? Rather, the child would not even learn the minimums. It is all about interpretation of education… you can use the same education for good and bad; even terrorists could be educated people.

This perception regarding education or schooling for children will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter. Here, it would be important to highlight that education was seen as having a ‘reformatory’ function in the lives of the people by the outsiders – although it was also debated as being only minimally important and playing an incremental role in how the child is being brought up on the whole.

d. A ‘community’: Labour class/servant class

M Block, Shiv Puri and K Block, despite being three distinct settings, were viewed by these informants (and everyone I talked to during the course of this study) as a unified whole. M Block was the name with which the area was identified and all other names

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9 He said this at a later point in time. This view has been presented here to explain this section better. I will refer to this again in Chapter Five.
were used less commonly or almost interchangeably with each other, as if the name didn’t really matter. Shivali, informing me about where the children came from, once wrongly used the names. And when I sought clarification she said, “How much does it matter? It is one and the same”. The geographical expanse of the area also did not come in the way of such an image, and the signposts pertaining to the distinct areas didn’t matter in this construction. As a researcher trying to find shorter routes and inroads, I had to identify and ask for places by some landmarks like “the third cut from the temple”, as nobody distinguished the names of the areas. It was only when talking about some very specific matters that people differentiated between these areas – that too ambiguously or with less confidence – for example, “At which bus stop should I get down to be able to be at walking distance from Shiv Puri”, or “How is the area divided into wards?”, or “Why don’t the children from the TC camp come to this school?” and the like. One of the reasons why it was difficult to differentiate between the areas, as was usually stated, was, “all look the same… there is no difference that you can make out.” What it meant was that the homes, residential clusters, shops and people in the three areas ‘looked’ the same. By “look” the informants intended to communicate the perceived homogeneity in the socio-economic status of the people living there. This was one feature that marked ‘the site and its people’ who were mostly referred to as one unit – “they” – by the outsiders others.

Most descriptions explained that these outsiders perceived the people living in the field as ‘one’ or ‘homogeneous’ also in terms of the functions they perform. The people were primarily viewed as those who ‘serve’ the surrounding better-off areas. Sarita tells me,

There is not much to be told about this area… most people are ‘labour class’ and depend on our colonies for their livelihoods; they cater to us by working at homes as servants, cleaning cars, selling vegetables and petty items… many good plumbers and carpenters live in the area but now-a-days they are expensive…
Jagwati, the NGO worker who herself resided in the area, also gives a similar statement, and says,

… when I lived here it was the same; I don’t know much except that this area houses people who do various kinds of jobs for the entire area… some have been staying here for a long time; but now as the work demands are increasing more new people are coming.

(The community workers of the NGO usually referred to their visits as ‘surveys’, and identified the places by the landmarks and not by names. It was through them that I learnt the ways of locating a particular site). A family member from one of the three families I interacted with, Mrs. Aggarwal, says,

… not that these people are excellent workers – they are rather very difficult to deal with… my own maid servant is very impolite and takes a lot of leaves… but what do we do? We hardly have an option… we provide them jobs and they only trouble us.

The variations among the people living there, which were very obvious to me as a researcher (in terms of regional affiliations, religion, language, occupations, the socio-economic profiles, the structure of housing), were never stated to define the distinction in the three areas by any of the ‘outsiders’ when I interacted with. What made the people living there all the more homogeneous was the idea that they, in some form or the other, were a class of people who ‘served’ the better-off residential establishments or the markets, and were therefore ‘dependant’ on the elite and middle class residing in the neighbourhood for their income. It was in this frame that the identity of the people was described by the outsiders as being ‘contingent’ on the better-off vicinities.

Further, the vocabulary of ‘us’ and ‘they’ was very pronounced. This ‘us’ and ‘they’ not only meant some kind of distinctive affiliation in terms of class (whereby the person speaking assumed the role of a representative of one class and attributed a similar role to the ‘other’ individual), it also separated the identities of the actors involved. That is, it identified the two groups distinctly as ‘employers’ and the
‘servants’, or the ‘labour class’ and the elite/middle class. It also gave a sense that the ‘outsider’ informants from somehow saw themselves as ‘doing good’ and playing a socially responsible function while providing ‘employment’ to the ‘insiders’. And in that, this was not a casual client and service provider relationship; there was a moral element involved in it. As Joseph and Goodman (2008, p. 4) say,

[Delhi] is now one of the richest cities in India and the great gap between the newly-empowered middle classes, its reactions and fears, and the poor constitutes an interesting phenomenon to observe. Finally, as said before, with the growing wealth of India, more and more people of the middle classes can afford to delegate tasks, and therefore there is a need for a close and cheap labour-force willing to execute these menial tasks. Hence the slum communities in Delhi are also becoming “job-banks” and offer the advantage of proximity to many an urban resident.

The above five characteristics that the outsiders outlined about the people, brought about an image of a homogeneous group which was residing in the vicinity not by chance but by design of their ‘culture’. This culture was marked by poverty, crime, filthiness and unwillingness to change. It was due to these markers that outsiders saw the three different areas as one – as an informant said, “all look the same… there is no difference that you can make out.” Therefore, the people living there were seen as a ‘community’.

e. Touch: Framing social distance

The outsiders’ hesitation from direct physical contact with the community was another aspect that came across somewhat subtly in the field. As described in Chapter Three, touch is a significant way for the children to make sense of ‘outsiders’ who do not appear to fit in the set-up. As a part of the compulsions of their regular work, the NGO workers have to build such a relationship. However, a sense of revulsion continues to prevail. The manner in which they describe their experience of touch does explicate this dilemma between compulsion and revulsion,
The fact that this is noticed shows that it has not become a natural part of their relationship with the community. And in this sense it retains a character situated in the ‘us’ and ‘they’ vision of the community. The narrative of the NGO, explaining the expectation of the school from the community, further explicates this concern. The children who were brought to the school were told by Ms. Kavita, “From tomorrow you all have to come to the school at this time; you have to bring a plate, a spoon, a pencil and a copy from home. All should bring their water bottles. *Aur sab naha dho kar, achi tarah taiyar hokar, saaf kapde pehen kar ana*” [and all take a bath, dress well, wear clean clothes and come]. On a visit to a child’s home, Jagwati complains to the mother, “*Aap isko thoda saaf suthra kar ke bheja karo, ye itni gandi ho kar school aati hai, acha thoda hi lagta hai.***” [You should send her a little neat and clean, she comes so dirty to school, doesn’t look good]. The narrative of the schoolteachers and the NGO workers matched on this aspect.

**f. Caste: “Doesn’t exist”**

Although Jagwati (along with all the community workers and Ms. Kavita), the teachers and Mrs. Aggarwal were of the view that ‘the slum’ is mostly populated by lower castes, they did not see caste as being a significant factor in the lives of the people. Jagwati says, “…*caste ka to itna yahan kuch fark padta nahin hai, gaon mein to hota hoga par yahan kuch aisa hai nahin.*” [caste doesn’t matter here; it would matter in the village but here it is nothing like that]. Mrs. Aggarwal says, “Whatever be the caste, they are all the same. I don’t think there is any caste factor at work.” This was a view which was maintained by the teachers as well. This was despite several observations that were contradictory to the claims made. And gradually as the work progressed the manner in which the concept of caste interfered in their meaning-

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10 [Earlier wasn’t used to, felt very bad, the whole area is so dirty that I would go covering my nose. But if we did so, people would not listen to us. Now I don’t even realise it. Several times I myself dress children to bring them to the school]
making and interactions with the people came to the fore. I will discuss this in subsequent chapters, while here I only share some contradictions. Mrs. Aggarwal kept the servant’s utensils (a glass and plate) separate, and used disposable glasses to offer water to the domestic help and others who did various kinds of work. She says,

… you never know who is what; who suffers from what disease is also not known to us… these people are non-vegetarians and drink and smoke while we are pure vegetarians – we don’t even have onions.

These weren’t seen by her as forms of practice of some form of conscious distancing from a particular social group which are based on particular perceptions of the ways of life of people. These practices were understood as essentials of a basic ‘hygienic’ routine. She explains,

… as if you don’t know, as Baniyas we don’t have non-veg and maintain purity in the kitchen …when I gave her [the house help] the job, I ensured that she is clean and doesn’t eat non-veg; she says she isn’t a lower caste but you never know. Many of them lie about it… what options do you have?

Mrs. Aggarwal was never ambivalent (nor expressed a compunction) about such views concerning caste and poverty, and the manner in which she presented the ideas appeared as if they form a ‘legitimate’ part of everyday common-sense – which she shared with me openly knowing the commonality between her and my ‘social background’. Yet, she thought of herself as being very kind and what she called a ‘modern’ person. She says, “… I have been a teacher and am well educated – my family has been super-modern in its thoughts and culture – even my grandmother was educated upto class five…” The relation that she made between ‘modern’, ‘culture’ (or values) and ‘education’, were resonated in the accounts of the teachers whom I interacted with during this study, and I will present them in Chapter Six. Such contradictions, in the manner in which the informants understood themselves and the ‘other’, became all the more prominent when interactions on the category of caste could be focussed upon a little more comfortably. This narrative provided a glimpse of how the concept of ‘hygiene’, interacts with the traditional practices of ‘purity’,
and constructs a ‘scientific, rationale and modern’ foundation for justifying social
distances that one social group continues to maintain with another.

Further, even having resided at the setting, Jagwati did not seem to consciously
register the fact that the slums which she ‘surveyed’ everyday also showed some
homogeneity with respect to the caste affiliations of the people living there. She and
her co-workers also were not very articulate about the struggle they faced while
knowing people’s caste affiliations (described in the next section). They had
somewhat ‘internalised’ the idea that practise of caste is restricted to villages. Jagwati
says, “Untouchability is illegal in the city”, (and her fellow community workers Neetu
and Surveen agreed\textsuperscript{11}). What was special in Jagwati’s case was that she, at a point in
time, shared with me how caste affiliation to an oppressed caste has never been a
hurdle in the way of the “progress” she has made. As we engaged in a dialogue on her
experience of education and employment, she felt that her family’s economic
conditions were primary in limiting her possibilities.

However, talking about caste (apart from the limited way in which it was involved in
her work) made her uncomfortable – which was visible in her outright rejection of the
idea that caste influences the possibilities of people in the slums. As she says, “When
caste is not practised here how would it hinder people’s lives? People are poor and
uneducated, which is the root of all the problems they have.” However, at a later stage
she herself highlighted how caste intervenes in the relation between a teacher and a
child, based on her experience at school. These contradictions (both in the case of
Jagwati and Mrs. Aggarwal) highlighted how a ‘conscious ignorance’ works like a
defence-mechanism in the everyday lives and common sense of the people – and how
it protects their self-concept or their concept about the civility and modernity of their
world from the contradictions that emerge from experience.

\textsuperscript{11} Ms. Kavita had a slightly different opinion, “… if you ask us, we all would know that these children who come
to us [the out-of-school children] are largely SCs but one cannot say that till one has to do something with this fact
[register children for schemes]… in our work it doesn’t matter but for the rich [upper caste?], it is important”.
4.2.2. Summing up: Culture of Poverty: Constructing ‘otherness’

The people whom I interacted with etched out a description that indicated some kind of a culture that was attributed to the life of the people living in the field. In their perception, poverty was the overarching framework that held this culture of crime, addiction, perversions, filthiness, and lack of concern for becoming civilised. This perceived culture lent the people living in the slum an identity as a ‘community’. The people, despite being different in their languages, customs and practices, were seen as a community that practised a culture of poverty – probably somewhat knowingly. For them, this culture reproduced itself through a strong socialisation of the children and did not allow people to progress and change. Such a view resembled the one that was ‘empirically established’ by Lewis (1959) in his concept of ‘culture of poverty’, which may be stated as:

… it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. In short, it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines. The culture of poverty has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members. It is a dynamic factor which affects participation in the large national culture and becomes a subculture of its own (Lewis 1964, p. 150).

Based on an anthropological study (on Puerto Ricans), Lewis developed a list of seventy traits that he further grouped in categories. Although he describes this concept as not being applicable to all situations (like, in the case of lower caste groups of India (Lewis, 1966)), the concept of culture of poverty has several problems for which it has been thoroughly critiqued – in that it has also been contradicted by researches (Coward, Feagin, and Williams, 1973). However, not very explicitly stated in the critiques, the problematic also seems to be situated in the formulation of the phrase ‘culture of poverty’. Such a view attempts to offer an all-encompassing explanation of varied human experiences and exclusions. Despite being empirically ‘explained’, such a view is refracted through the assumptions through which the identity of ‘the poor’ is constructed. It not only views the people in a singular frame, it also authenticates a
singular explanation of the experience of ‘poverty’, which does not explain the nature of cultural diversity and dialogues between cultures (Nandy, 2012).

Such a singular view of ‘the poor’ also supports the discourse that increasingly makes it possible to de-legitimise the claims of the people on the city; particularly when such a discourse finds space in the State policy and the ideology of the systems of justice. The singular category of the poor is associated with a particular morality which is based on images like that of nuisance-makers, anti-social and illiterate. While tracing the recent origin of the ‘nuisance’ discourse that legitimises demolition of slums, Ghertner (2008) writes,

… how the category “nuisance” is fundamentally aesthetic, tied to dominant perceptions of acceptable conduct and visual appearance. The ability to criminalize, punish, and expel populations (of the poor, informal, migrant, etc.) that do not conform to the aesthetic norms of Indian cities—i.e., those that look like nuisances—hence presents a new, or at least newly significant, arena for urban struggle in the post-colonial Indian city. This is especially the case given the observation that India’s elite have cultivated a “world-class” aesthetic that they are using to try to create “bourgeois cities,” largely through the language of “environmental improvement” and “beautification” (p. 57).

While such views construct a kind of ‘otherness’ with which people are visualised, they also implicate the manner in which the people conceptualise themselves – it socialises the people in a psychology of guilt and shame, and feeling ‘illegitimate’ (Said, 1973). Being located in an urban context, and being continuously defined by a common set of views and policies, the people also develop a view of the world that is based on these shared experiences of exclusion and humiliation, or a set of meanings and ways of ‘coping’ – that do not represent ‘a culture’, but involve shared connotations that are discursively generated.

4.2.3. A view from inside
As a researcher, I continued to ‘test’ these images and descriptions as I observed and engaged with the people in the ‘community’. In doing so, along with the observations, I interacted with the ‘insiders’ to understand how they perceived their life and conditions. In this process, it emerged that the same facts were being attributed different meanings. Instead of presenting the sketch in a vis-à-vis manner against the above descriptors, in the following pages I choose to present the categories of analysis that emerged from the people’s narratives about themselves and their lives. These may not describe in totality what the people thought about themselves but may provide a glimpse of the experiences and lives of insiders, the meanings they construct and their way of negotiating with the social world. These observations and discussions took place throughout the work with the NGO, particularly in the unauthorised slum clusters and squatters located in the area where fewer children were accessing the school, and with the families dwelling on the footpaths.

a. Meanings and ways of knowing: Narratives from the field

It is a difficult task to etch out how community knowledge scaffolds because it requires a deeper philosophical understanding and a further involved participation with the community. However, it is possible to document and identify characteristics and instances of how meaning-making happens in the community. Some instances of these are shared below.

i. Memory and time

In the interactions, particularly when I was inquiring about the local history of the area and the journey of the families residing in the area, it came across that the insiders (informants and the people I talked to in general) had a specific way of describing events. The manner in which the people memorised, took note, remembered and recalled things had a peculiar character. Most events in the memories and recalls were not elicited through dates, days, months and years, and use of calendars. They were described lucidly and were related to something which I would know. For instance, to describe ages of children, several parents did not state the birth date. Like one mother said, “She is around 12; she was born in the year when
the next door jhuggi was pulled down.” Here, the mother was estimating the age of her child based on an event that was important to her – so much so that she relates the birth of her only child (who she says, “was born after lot of prayers”) to the event. What is central in the recall is not the year but the event or incident. Similarly, there were expressions like: “we came here in the year next to the one in which there was a flood in this drain, and left when the police station was being built”, “she left the school in the year in which the doctor told us that her father had T.B….”. These events had a certain peculiar character, they were events that were particularly locally situated, and continued to have a bearing on the present lives. In this process, as a researcher I also realised that the categories of inquiry that were of concern to me, were not really significant in the memory and lives of the people. The age of a child, the date of marriage or the date of coming to Delhi were not as consequential for the people as pulling down of the neighbourhood settlement, flood of the drain and a disease were. These critical experiences were in the centre of the lives of the people, and were not only retained but were also the instruments through which meanings were made, or the context in which the meanings were situated.

**ii. Government, nation, state**

In this line, certain events and occasions also appeared to hold a very different meaning for the people. For example, 15th August, comes as a haunting for the footpath dwellers and those who are understood as ‘petty criminals’ every year. Many footpath dwellers are pushed-off coercively to the outskirts of Delhi, and their houses are pulled down. Those living as tenants in the squatters are asked to produce proofs of identity and are ‘detained’ for petty charges, which otherwise hardly matter to the police – for example Teekam’s neighbour, Chauvey, a rickshaw puller went to pee on the roadside, when his fellows shouted to alarm of the police which came to shoo them away from the metro station. His rickshaw was ceased by the police and was returned only after a lot of “begging”.

It is only during this time around the year that the morning markets and the weekly markets do not function properly for people are ‘asked too many questions’ and a lot
of ‘checking’ happens. Another neighbour was thrashed for being drunk and loitering on the road after 12 am. At random the stall keepers are harassed and their goods are forfeited by what is referred to as “committee ki gadi” (MCD van). One of the informants, Hazari says, “They don’t even accept bribe during this time; but other times they keep loitering around and troubling us for ‘commission’…I have changed the business now; they cannot do anything.”

**Box. 4.3.: Hazari: A ‘child’ in the State**

Hazari (13 years old) now supplies water in milton containers to the nearby shops. He fills some thirty containers from the ‘sarkari nal’ (government tap), loads 12 of them to a rented cart (tagged Malik 102) at a time and takes them to the shops for which he has a (verbal) contract with the shopkeepers. The neighbourhood women of the jhuggi along with Hazari and his mother are now planning to supply cooked meal to the shops as well – which all of them feel would be a big leap. Hazari’s father he says has now “become useless” (bekar hogaya) as he has been suffering from chronic tuberculosis. His youngest brother (2 years) and mother also share the disease now. The biggest challenge facing him he says is to get the ‘kagaj-patri’ for starting up his own work, while money can be managed from ‘here and there’ – he says he has the ‘jaan pehchan’.

It is also important to note that the people know about 15th August particularly for these reasons. Teekam says, “… Chauvey’s rickshaw was ceased last year… every year this happens. We men folk are troubled and then after some days things are back on track. Otherwise what do we have to do with 15 August?” In the moment when the police was ensures ‘safety’ of the city transport, the ‘illegitimacy’ of another form of life (and livelihood) also gets defined. None of the children and most women who I interacted with during the field visits had known the occasion; neither did they have a clue about the Commonwealth Games being organised, nor were they bothered when the NGO workers talked to them for this. The ‘legitimate’ meanings and ways of making sense are exclusive, and exclude several systems of meaning-making. The power of these exclusive systems makes it a compulsion for marginalised communities not only to respond to them but also to accept them as legitimate and as
the standards. They negotiate with this demand by devising their own mechanisms, using their experiences as a group to evolve standards. These standards are understood by the community but not by outsiders.

We can take this instance further to understand them in relation to the messages that systems and processes of the State communicate to them, and to the meaning and knowledge they construct about these. A narrative that emerges from the field in this regard relates to the proof of citizenship. In order to access any institution of the State, including school (though now changed), the State machinery demands a documentary proof of citizenship – birth-certificate, ration-card, voter-card, etc. Even having these proofs does not guarantee access in the real sense of the term. For instance, having a proof of citizenship and therefore access to a government’s health services does not ensure access to treatment and a guarantee for cure. More often than not, people do not get these documents prepared out of will. They are made under compulsion and psychological coercion from the State functionaries. I will soon discuss in the context of school (in the next chapter) how a birth-certificate or an affidavit is made, not because it is legally ‘necessary’ but because the system makes it so. Not having a permanent residence, besides rigid bureaucratic mechanisms, makes it even more challenging for the community to gather these proofs. It becomes even more difficult to access State institutions, as these proofs act as filtering mechanisms that prohibit the people from entering the legitimised systems. Zahid (NGO worker) says,

They have to be at times told about all this as we try to help them by linking them to an employment prospect ….sometimes when it is not possible to get a regular janampatri or residence proof made, we get fake ones made for them. ….it’s for their benefit but they have to be told about these things otherwise they will say something here or there. …not even once have the fake ones been caught; this is because fake or real hardly matters, no one looks at them…these are only for the sake of it.

This is a manner in which the exclusivity of these systems seemed to work. State representatives hold the community answerable for not accessing the ‘public’
institutions and not following what the law makes obligatory – and thereby deeming this as an act of ‘nuisance’. In this way, exclusion from these institutions also creates a psychology of guilt and shame among the community. This is another manner in which State institutions, and the culture they propagate, gain even more ‘worth’ and legitimacy. Despite being absent from the lives of these people, these mechanisms still exercise a socio-psychological control over them by creating a sense of deprivation (Illich, 1971).

While there are people who have the awareness, necessity, time and ‘jaan-pehchan’ to get these documents made, there are many others who resist the idea of these papers. Against the requirement of documentary proofs for claiming citizenship, the community asserts its existence by rejecting these exclusionary processes and institutions, including schools. Daya (Teekam’s sister) says,

…we chose to go to the hakeem. …he does not distinguish between one with kagaz and one without. …he doesn’t also charge money for our children and treats all; he doesn’t have magic in his hands, but at least treats us.

These experiences shape meanings that the State and its institutions hold for the community, and its purpose of accessing them.

The Sarkar, in general, seems to be non-existent in the everyday lives of people – particularly in the illegal squatters – in the sense that it does not comes across as a system to which people look up to as a support mechanism\textsuperscript{12}. The Sarkar is rather seen like a gatekeeper, which regulates access to the institutions it claims to have established for the public; and in doing so it defines the ‘public’ or people it would cater to or ‘include’. In a discussion with Teekam and Chauvey on their notions of the Sarkar (though I could not probe beyond a point), I came across expressions like the following that Teekam said: “The Sarkar can do whatever it wants to; it will use the stick twice, everything will happen. Whatever she says, it has to happen.” Teekam was surprised to know that I didn’t know much about the sarkar. He says, “Arey, you

\textsuperscript{12} Das’s (2004, 2010) work would also support this.
are educated, you don’t know? Then who will know?... khabron mein roz ata hai” [comes in the news daily].

The source of this construction of the *Sarkar* is located in the visual media, experience and local gossip. The *Sarkar* appeared to be perceived here as an authoritative and monolithic entity which is manifested in one person. The notions of democracy, nation and ‘government’ do not seem to pitch in here. Teekam did not have a vote in Delhi, like the many others in the slum where he resided. Some were registered in the electoral rolls in other states, while others (mostly women) said that they were not registered anywhere. While the functions that the ‘*Sarkar*’ plays are seen as being coercive (and experienced as well), the distance from the system makes it an intriguing concept for Teekam. Through a variety of such experiences, as I discovered the relationship between the State and the people in the socio-spatial setting, I attempted to make sense of the embedded meanings – particularly of the lack of visibility of the State and its apparent distance. Das and Poole (2004) offered a frame (which I shall continue to follow through the thesis) to understand the situation:

Our analytical and descriptive strategy was to distance ourselves from the entrenched image of the state as a rationalized administrative form of political organization that becomes weakened or less fully articulated along its territorial or social margins. Instead… reflect on how the practices and politics of life in these areas shaped the political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices that constitute, somehow, that thing we call “the state”. (p. 3)

### iii. Begging as livelihood

The people I visited during the ‘survey-of-the-field’ phase also included those who engaged in begging as a means of livelihood. They were the ones who were the poorest among those living in the field, and resided on footpaths – most being homes headed by women. I visited around 20 such families and felt that it was most difficult to engage with these families on the matter of sending their children to school, and they either refused to talk or said that they would not send the children to school. I
interacted with two such families in-depth and continued to visit them until they shifted their location. My relation with these two families (particularly with the women heading them) developed through a peculiar incident, which initially appeared to be a coincidence or what one may call ‘serendipity’ in research. However, now when I reflect, it appears to be a part of my ‘being there’.

While I went into the field to ‘trace’ out-of-school children while working with the NGO, I approached two families residing on the footpath across the old mandir and opposite the State run hospital. Both the families had tied a tent to the footpath railing and balanced it in front with the help of bamboo sticks. Except for boxes, utensils and a mat, there was not anything that these shelters could accommodate. One of the families had four children aged between 4 months and 6 years. The other had four children between 8 months and 12 years, the eldest of whom was mentally retarded. In the second family the male head was suffering from chronic tuberculosis – as the woman of the house told me, he was rendered ‘useless’. He had also passed on his disease to the youngest child (whose one eye was visibly affected by tuberculosis) and also to the mother. Since the man was rendered useless, the woman (Aasaa) told me that she was running the family with her 10-year-old son who was working with a local butcher. In the first family, I did not see the male and was told by the woman of the house (Lachhi) that he had gone out to work. In the context of sending their children to the NGO school, Jagwati was able to convince both the families after three visits. On the day when Jagwati and I were escorting the children and the mothers to show them the school – at around 12 pm – the mothers who were initially agreeable, suddenly started resisting. One of them said, “Didi we won’t be able to go at this time… This is when our food van comes; if we go we would lose our day’s meal.” Both the mothers convinced us and turned back. The idea of the ‘food van’ was new to me and therefore I tried to talk to them. However, I was bluntly and rudely shooed away.

Later on when I reached the main road to go to the University, the children of these women, who were already there before me, came up to me. I asked them how they had found me and to answer that they pulled me to their mothers. It was at this time
that I realised that the mothers were beggars, who had been begging in the market area and at a major traffic signal at Rabindra Garden, for the past several months. I had spotted them before I had started my research work, but could not recognise them in the field. The women appeared to feel sorry and shared with me the reason for lying to me. As I continued to meet them over a month, I got a glimpse of the life there. Lachhi (28) got married when she was 13. Her husband grew up being what she calls a ‘charasi’. They had always been poor she said and the condition was not new to her. However, she was disturbed when the police started troubling her because of her husband’s addiction. As the addiction grew, he started stealing things from here and there in order to buy substance. She said, “He engaged in all sorts of wrongs and was arrested by the police several times; even now he is in jail.”

In these circumstances Lachhi had to manage the family alone. Finding a job was not at all an option in her case. Her history, lack of belonging to any community, destitute poverty, gender, lack of a permanent residence – all excluded her from the institution of work. In such a case, begging was the only ‘dignified’ option open to her. It was better than stealing and prostitution, and also made her life flexible to be able to take care of her children. Her children could also assist her in this and all of them could earn enough to have a day’s meal. Three among her children were girls. She was not against sending her children to school, but did not see any meaning in it – particularly because she would be soon shifting to another place to live with her sister. She had not met her husband during the past several months and did not really refer to him in our many discussions unless I specifically asked. It appeared that she had accepted the non-existence of her husband in her life. She said, “His being here or not doesn’t make a difference; rather, I feel troubled when he is here.”

Aasaa’s case was more complicated. For her, begging was a makeshift source of income. She begs while she shifts between the small jobs she takes up now and then. She said,

   My husband is useless now… His addiction ruined us. I was earlier working as a garbage collector but then I had T.B. and bore this child
who had T.B. My eldest son was born different… Now that my second son will work with the butcher, I will stop begging and find some small job.

She felt that the butcher was kind as he had accepted her son for the job at the request of a neighbour, without asking for any security. The ‘kind-butcher’ despite sounding oxymoronic, in this case looked “true” as he was the only one among the many people who gave a job to the family. Aasaa’s condition is likely to deteriorate, therefore she would become increasingly less capable of earning. She therefore wishes that her second son should acquire the skills of work as soon as possible. On the question of the schooling of her four children, there is a strange complication involved. The eldest son was born different (‘ye sabse alag hi tha paida hue se hi’), and her second son got a job with great difficulty and therefore was the only hope. Her third child is a girl who is underage for school, and as per Asaas’s belief may not be ‘safe’ at school. The youngest child has chronic TB. Whom among them should she send to school, is her question.

The manner in which both the women explained their feeling of being trapped, the question of the ‘agency’ of parents and ‘willingness’ to educate the children (which in fact is now a fundamental duty of a parent/guardian with the 86th constitutional amendment (GOI, 2002)), was not only made problematic but sounded irrational. How the individual is bound by social circumstances and the manner in which her possibility is framed by her socio-historical position (Mills, 1959) became vivid in these instances. Along with this, the ‘givenness’ of schooling also started becoming problematic. From the lens of the women not only did schooling appear impossible, it looked futile as well (Illich, 1971; Gandhi, 1909).

What emerged all the more prominently was the structure and conception of a family that did not match that of the middle classes and even of the relatively better-off families in the field. The roles a man, a woman and a child play in a family, were defined by the conditions of life (which included a different hue of caste and poverty relationship) – and the decision regarding schooling was constituted by this context.
As I observed the variety of life conditions within the social setting, I could also see diversity in how children were located in the design of relationships and families, and began to understand the similarities and differences in their experiences.

**Box. 4.4: Safety of children**

Suneeta is a 35-year-old woman who works as a ‘maid’ in several houses situated across a market place. She has two daughters, Meenu (6) and Chikki (3+), and one son Mahesh (12). The older ones go to school. When Suneeta goes for work at 8 am until about 11 am, Chikki stays with her father who goes to work by 12 pm. After her morning work, Suneeta goes back home and cooks a meal, and by then her daughter Meenu returns from school. She brings Meenu and Chikki with her for next work shift around 2 pm. When she reaches the market, on a marked place near the locality where she works, she settles Meenu with a weighing scale and a bag. This bag has water, a meal to eat, and the homework that Meenu got from the school. Suneeta then moves ahead, with Chikki following her to the workplace. Suneeta does not take Chikki along to the house where she works because the employers do not like it, and also because Chikki cries in ‘closed strange’ houses. She leaves Chikki on the staircase that leads to the house, and the child sometimes cries for a while and then moves back towards her sister. She continues to move around on the pavement in the market place until Suneeta returns (around 4.30 pm). The people passing by buy eatables for Chikki when they see her standing and staring near food stores, usually a packet of biscuits. However, it did not come across that people thought that she was lost. Some women asked her where her mother was, but when she did not reply they moved on. To men she was invisible until she came in their way.

Meenu does not engage much with Chikki but offers her water. She also does not stop her from wandering around. She hardly looks at what is happening on the pavement and is engrossed in her study. At times she asks young women and girls, who come to weigh themselves, to help her with her homework and in calculating the change. She has learnt to read out particular weights (40, 50, 45, 55) but reads
them as *panch-panch, chaar-panch* [five-five, four-four] etc. She sometimes falls asleep on the pavement with her notebook open on her lap. At times when she is hungry she asks her young women clients to buy something for her. She looks exhausted most of the time and is underweight for her age. Her eyesight also seems to be deteriorating, as she bends down too much to read her book. Their mother is convinced about both the children. About Chikki she said, “She won’t go anywhere; till I come she roams around this place only… she knows that I will return and that her sister is sitting here.” Regarding Meenu she says, “She is very obedient and honest. Doesn’t say anything, no mischief; she stays at the place where you make her sit, she also keeps the money properly”.

There were several situations in which the notions of ‘safety’, ‘privacy’, ‘care’ and ‘dependence’ got differently defined in the context of the children living in different kinds of settings. It would be difficult to describe these situations, but these will get formulated in Chapter Seven which focuses on the experiences of the children.

**4.3. Between the ‘us’ and the ‘they’: Concluding discussions**

The manner in which the outsiders construct ‘the slum dwellers’ represents the political ethos of the urban space, or a special urban space that is the capital city of the country and in that it also brings forth the political character of the State itself. Such character of cities has come to be a subject matter of research and analysis. Duneier (2000) who studied the black male vendors on the streets of New York’s Greenwich Village, also finds how an ‘us’ and ‘they’ politics of the urban space intricately involves the contestations between the blacks and whites, and the poor and rich. He highlights how increasingly the black vendors are politically made vulnerable in the city, in the guise of cleanliness and safety discourses. However, the economic and social functions that they serve are what make them indispensable for the city. But this experience increasingly generated a psychological ‘conflict’ among the people in question. To me, such generation of conflicts appears to be a process of interaction between the meaning that others attribute to the everyday life of those living in the slum and the meaning that it holds for this community.
A child is situated amidst such structures of relationships and experiences the world in this context. While going to school generates one kind of experience (that I will discuss in the further chapters), being at ‘home’ or being at work constitutes a different set of conditions. The activities and lives of the children are deemed meaningless by the ‘others’ in society, which comes across through abuses, taunts, expressions, and phrases, used for the people, particularly for the male adolescents and children – like ‘badmash’, ‘bhikhari’, ‘gunda’, ‘awara’, and ‘chor’. These abuses and rejections shape their self-concept as individuals, and the self-image of the people as a community. Narratives that can potentially explicate this, have been frequently come across during field visits. In the process of interaction with mothers in the slum regarding the schooling of their children, similar responses emerged frequently – which are represented in what Lachhi articulated: "kya karenge ye school jake, banenge to wahi jo inhe banana hai”, “Badmash banenge ye sab apne baap ki tarah, awara hain sab, school le jane se kuch nahi hoga“13. The possibilities in the lives of the children were already ‘clear’ to the mothers. What Bourdieu (1974) presents in theory becomes visible in how the mother describes the possibilities of her child at school even without having experienced schooling. Hazari poignantly makes a case, … koi in sabko le bhi jaega school to bhi ye sab do din mein bhaag aenge... inhe pata to hai hi bade hokar karna to kaam hai aise hi... main bhi gaya tha do-teen din phir samajh agaya... kuch nahin hai bekar hai, kya karna hai14.

Here, a desire to progress encounters a communication from the society of it being impossible. I at times wondered if I was wrong in reading that some of the people I met at the field had a ‘sociological imagination’ that became evident in the way they defined their aspirations and reconciled with the social world. These conflicts further take an intricate form when the nature of marginalisation compounds. For example, in the case of female children in the slum, the complexity of conflicts takes another level

13 “what would they do going to the school, they will anyway become what they have been destined to”, “they will become Badmash like their fathers, they are all vagrants, schooling will do nothing.”
14 “...even if they are taken to school they will run away in two days...they know that as grown-ups they have to do only the same work that the family is doing... I also went for two-three months but then I understood ...it is nothing, it is useless, what’s the need.”
when the issues of social-physical safety and gender roles intervene with their
economic and social independence. These lives amidst conflicts develop their own
realities, truths, standards, and processes that operate in the backdrop of the
negotiations with the world. These realities are in a way the structures on which the
knowledge of the community scaffolds.

As I pursued the study, I also experienced a sense of shift in the paradigm with which
I understood the world. Although I was prepared to understand social relationships,
the manner in which they unfolded before me was not something that I had expected.
While a researcher would ideally maintain objectivity and a focus, the meaning of
objectivity in social research came across to me as being politico-subjectively
constituted. As I entered the field, the scope of what I was doing expanded and I was
unable to delineate my work in the manner in which an objective researcher would.
How the categories of ‘us’ and ‘they’ govern the social world and the lives, became a
prominent concern for my work and for me as a person. Works like that of Said
(1978), Das and Poole (2004), Mills (1959), Gandhi (1909) and Ambedkar (2002)
helped me to reconcile with the experiences that I was having in the field, in a system
of ideas and thoughts that explain the relationships between society, institutions,
oppression and individuals – though may be not in an educational context.

It is not that I was not prepared to pursue such kind of an analysis – rather I had set
out to do so. However, the meaning and depth of the questions that framed this
inquiry were ‘experienced’ by me as I looked at the social reality from a different
standpoint (the standpoint of the informants). I began making sense of what it means
to ask: “What is the structure of this particular society as a whole?... Where does this
society stand in human history?...What varieties of men and women now prevail in
this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail?” (Mills,
1959, p. 6-7).
I studied the meaning of schooling for the community and the experiences of children
in the school in this context. I also situated the teacher and the NGO workers in this
socio-political ethos and tried to map their life spaces in relation to that of the children
from the community, or I should say the community as a whole. The subsequent section of the thesis is a presentation of this work and the understandings so drawn. Although, it would have been ideal to present a picture of the school context in this chapter, it appeared to fit much more meaningfully in the next chapter.

Before proceeding to the next section, it seems relevant to share the organisation of the next three chapters of the thesis that pertain to the findings from the field. As stated in Chapter One, from Chapter Five onwards the thesis begins to focus on the ‘school experience’. While on the one hand the chapters have been organised based on the prominent categories of observations, on the other it has been a challenging task to separate them from each other in a ‘neat’ fashion. As a result, a reader may experience a certain degree of ‘messiness’ in the organisation of the data. However, the pattern of the organisation follows the logic of presenting all those accounts at one place, which help in substantiating or building a theme. While the school as an institutional (and political) space is spread across these chapters, the perspective and purpose of explorations differ. Similarly, while in each of the three chapters the focus is on a different category of informants, those from the other categories also appear in episodes and parts in each chapter. This is because I observed (or made sense of) the field reality as being created and shaped in the relational ethos between the various actors. Thus, it appeared essential to present (or reconstruct) this ethos through a thick description of the interactions between these actors. For example, Chapter Five, Idea of School, focuses on the community’s idea of school. However, in this process it builds on the perceptions of the State school’s functionaries and the NGO workers about the community and its ‘willingness’ and educability. Chapter Six, The Teachers and the School Space, has a focus on the schoolteachers. Yet, to position the teachers in relation to the community, it draws on the interactions between the teachers, the parents and the schoolchildren. Chapter Seven, Experiences of the Children, begins with some narratives of the teachers and the parents with an idea of building a context in which children’s experiences can be situated. This chapter includes the experiences of the children inside and outside the school space. Those descriptions that were significant but did not directly fit in the text, have been presented in boxes (as
vignettes) and in the annexure. The supportive unprocessed (or raw) data have been presented in the appendices.